Rio Grande National Forest Plan Revision
Water and Soil Resources Meeting #2
April 7, 2015
Alamosa, CO
Meeting Summary

Attendees

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Erin Minks, Earl Robinson, Vaughn Thacker
- *Peak Facilitation*: Kristin Barker, Heather Bergman

Approximately 15 members of the public were present.

Meeting Overview

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) recently began revising the forest plan for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). Members of the public attended this meeting to discuss water and soil resources on the RGNF; this was the second meeting held to discuss this topic in the San Luis Valley. Information gathered from this and previous discussions will help inform the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

Forest Plan and Revision Process

Mike Blakeman, RGNF Public Affairs Officer, explained that the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15-20 years. The last forest plan for the Rio Grande was finalized in 1996; the process of revising the plan recently began. The revision consists of three steps expected to be completed in 2017: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and finally a monitoring phase. USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform the assessment phase, in which current conditions and trends are analyzed to determine which portions of the existing plan should be changed. After determining the need for change, USFS will develop and analyze multiple management options to determine the most beneficial options for inclusion in the final forest plan.

Mr. Blakeman explained that the RGNF holds the headwaters of the Rio Grande River and provides water for plants, animals, and people in the San Luis Valley and beyond. Since the last forest plan was created, changes to factors like forest health, wildfire regimes, forest uses, climate, and infrastructure have impacted the forest and could potentially affect water and soil resources. Mr. Blakeman stressed the importance of public participation and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public also can provide input by email at comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande@fs.fed.us, on the interactive plan revision web site at http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

Community Discussions

Participants broke into small groups to discuss three main themes related to water and soil resources: resources in specific areas of the forest, assessment questions, and forest plan standards and guidelines. A summary of key themes from the discussion follows.

MAP-BASED DISCUSSION

-GREEN - **Areas with good conditions that should be maintained**	
Beneficial Technology	• Lobo Overlook radar forecasting and flood monitoring (enhanced public safety) • Aqua Ramon communication site upgrades
Additional Areas	• River Hill/30-Mile (USFS/RWEACT* joint project) • Tucker Ponds • West of Deer Gulch (no livestock use; candidate for Research Natural Area?)
-ORANGE- **Areas of emerging/possible future concerns, or areas with potential for expansion/enhancement**	
Excessive Standing Dead (Fire, safety, and sedimentation concerns)	• Above Continental – Big Buck Creek • Ute Creek • Weminuche Creek • Basin above Santa Maria Reservoir • Spring Creek Pass – Tabor Ditch • Basin above Shaw Lakes and Big Meadows
Erosion Concerns	• Lost Trail • West Lost Trail/Pole Creek • Miners Creek Trail • South Fork Trail • Stony Pass Road (from heavy recreational use of 4-wheelers)

Maintenance Concerns in Wilderness	• Transmountain diversion (dead trees and wilderness rule preventing maintenance)
	• Dam safety issues
	  ○ Spruce Lakes
	  ○ Trout Lake
	  ○ Goose Lake

-PINK – **Areas with current concerns**	
Post-Burn Area Concerns	• Humphrey's Reservoir (sedimentation in reservoir from burn area above) • Reagan Lake • Metroz Lake • Trout Creek (debris flow and fish kill from burn area runoff) • Little Ruby and Ruby Lakes; Fuchs Reservoir
Erosion Concerns	• Rock Creek side of Bennett Park (heavy off-road ATV use; cattle trailing) • FS Road 600 to Wheeler Geologic Area (multitrack; muddy holes) • Brewster Park – FS Road 520, Stony Pass Road (erodes into Rio Grande River) • Dorsey Creek (heavy ATV trailing)
Additional Concerns	• Wolf Creek Ski Area (worst snowpack since 1976) • Lujan Pass – Sheep Creek, Beaver Creek (cross-country ATV use; RV camping right beside Sheep Creek damaging riparian resources) • South Fork of Conejos – Green Lake Trail (cattle get past gate and overgraze) • Kelly Creek (drought; livestock trailing; illegal single track use) • Piedra Pass – Don LaFonte diversions 1, 2, 3 (need maintenance) • Upper Rock Creek • BLM land – Elephant Rock (user-created mountain bike trails; noxious weeds)

*RWEACT stands for Rio Grande Watershed Emergency Action Coordination Team

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Is high water quality and soil productivity being maintained on the RGNF? What factors are impacting water quality and soil productivity?

Land Use Practices	• ATV-related erosion (e.g., eroding trails turning Frisco Creek brown) • Wolf Creek development (will use and impact water and soil resources) • Road kill contamination of creek along Poncha Pass • Illegal dumping throughout forest
Livestock Grazing	• Impacts are well managed • Impacts are not well managed due to lack of USFS resources – permittees self-manage • Grazing should be addressed differently in post-fire allotments • Cattle strongly affect water quality in riparian areas (trample stream banks, decrease vegetation, increase sedimentation)
Natural Processes	• Fire runoff increases water sedimentation • Fire ash provides soil nutrients downstream • Dead trees (from fires and beetle outbreaks) could affect runoff • Warmer temperatures (especially at night) increase early runoff • Earlier snowmelt increases water turbidity, runoff, and sedimentation • Riparian zones hold main importance for water quality

Are watersheds and riparian ecosystems on the RGNF and surrounding areas healthy and properly functioning? What factors are impacting watershed or riparian health?

Management Activities and Infrastructure	• ATV trails need to be reevaluated (increased water sedimentation and impacted soil when trails do not follow contours) • Lack of USFS resources results in inadequately addressing issues • Saguache Park riparian area fencing has been beneficial

Natural Processes	• Changes in snowmelt affect water quality
	• Wildlife impact riparian areas when not moved by predators
	• Stock tanks have run dry in recent years
	• Decreased rainfall/moisture availability has resulted in fewer good mushroom years recently than historically
	• Non-native plants impact riparian areas
	  ○ Noxious weeds (e.g., Russian knapweed, pepperweed)
	  ○ Russian olive (participants expressed differing viewpoints on whether this tree is beneficial to water and wildlife)

Areas of Concern	• Kelly Creek – noticeable sedimentation in water • Wheeler Geologic Area – roads overused; soil damage • Lujan Pass – beaver activity flooded road; vehicles driving around flooded area are causing off-road damage • Sheep Creek – everyone camps right beside river; negative impacts to water • Elephant Rock area (BLM land) – overrun by non-native plants
Additional Comments	• Sediment loading since the 1940s has increased drastically due to human activities • Some road systems should be closed

How do water and soil resources on the RGNF contribute to social, cultural, and economic sustainability?

Economic Impacts	• Decreased snowpack negatively impacts economy • Timber and agriculture impact local economy and rely on water
Cultural Impacts	• Hispanic culture connects water to culture; water is vital to cultural sustainability • Traditional Hispanic uses of the forest (e.g., firewood gathering) important for social and culture
Land Use and Management Impacts	• Junior water rights holders – possibly pulling water from reservoir because there is not enough left after senior water rights are used • Agricultural practices – watering inefficiently in high winds; creating dust events that speed snowmelt • Grazing management – grass stubble helps retain snowpack longer in ponderosa and pinon-juniper zones, but not much stubble usually left on USFS allotments
Natural Processes	• Earlier runoff negatively impacts local agriculture • Spruce beetle impacts many issues (water, economics, social, and safety considerations)
Additional Comments	• RGNF unique because there is basically just one big Rio Grande watershed (most forests have multiple smaller watersheds) • Water supply inadequate for demand • Fire causes economic problems – area closures, fewer tourists

STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Standards and guidelines are the "rules of the forest" that are documented in a forest plan. Standards are requirements; they are things the Forest Service *must* do. Guidelines are things the Forest Service can or should do. During this meeting, participants reviewed and discussed several standards and guidelines that are in the current forest plan. Forest Service staff identified these standards and guidelines for discussion due to confusion regarding their meaning, difficulty implementing them, and/or changed context on the ground. Participants were invited to provide feedback about whether the standards and guidelines are working, whether they should be changed from standards to guidelines or vice versa, and whether they should be deleted altogether.

***Riparian Areas Guideline #6* - Remove livestock from riparian areas when average stubble heights on key species reach 4 inches in early-use pastures and 6 inches or more in late-use pastures.**

Keep Guideline	• Leave as guideline – allows flexibility to adjust for conditions • Important to keep resource healthy – must move cattle out even if elk ate plants first
Change Guideline	• Make a standard • Define minimum stubble height but allow more flexibility • Address inadequate monitoring and enforcement of Annual Operating Instructions (AOI) – self-regulation unreliable • Prohibit grazing in wilderness
Additional Comments	• Permittees in large areas work hard to keep within parameters • No predators to push cattle/wildlife, so damage more severe than traditionally • Quantify and account for wildlife use of riparian areas, particularly in light of increased impact due to current drought conditions

***Riparian Areas Guideline #8* - Limit utilization of riparian woody plants to 15-20% of current annual growth and of herbaceous plants to 40-45% of annual production.**

Keep Guideline	• Good guideline if based on best available science • Keep as guideline (do not change to standard)
Change Guideline	• Remove guideline – meaningless with no clear practical way to enforce • Reassess whether utilization rates match best available science • Define species and timing of measurement
Additional Comments	• Determine moose utilization • Account for both wildlife and cattle use

***Sediment Control Standard #1*- Reclaim roads and other disturbed sites when use ends as needed to prevent resource damage.**

Keep Standard	• Keep as standard (do not change to guideline) • Prioritize and work through list of reclamation sites • Be strategic about closures – leave roads open for use • Close roads to prevent ATV use • Focus on off-road ATV issues • Prevent ATV misuse by closing roads or sections that allow access to off-road use
Change Standard	• Change to guideline • Change language to match actual actions – closing areas, not reclaiming them • Reclaim only specific sections that are more in danger of erosion and reclaim the beginnings of roads directly behind closure signs • Focus on watershed restoration, not the entire length of the road • Spot-treat crossings, etc. to protect resources (more effective use of USFS resources)

***Soil Productivity Standard #1* - Manage land treatments to limit the sum of severely burned and detrimentally compacted, eroded, and displaced land to no more than 15% of any land unit.**

Change Standard	• Create a caveat for salvage or sanitation harvest in relation to beetle kill or fire • Make a guideline for more flexibility • Remove entirely – seems arbitrary; needs more flexibility; no longer appropriate due to changed conditions • Redefine using best available science

Additional Questions

- *Will one of the public meetings during this assessment phase talk about grazing?*
  We don't plan to hold a meeting focusing only on grazing, because the topic comes up in many of our other meetings (for example, at this water and soil meeting, as well as at the recreation and vegetation meetings). We do plan to contact the Cattlemen's Association about potentially holding a grazing-specific co-hosted meeting with them.
- *How is soil quality measured?*
  The RGNF measures different soil characteristics in order to determine soil productivity and quality. These include but are not limited to soil productivity, disturbance levels, and long-term plant community production levels.